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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [ECON IS KWBG PREL ISRAELI PALESTINIAN AFFAIRS GAZA DISENGAGEMENT](#)

SUBJECT: RAMON SUPPORTS WEST BANK-GAZA RAIL LINK AS AN
INTERIM STEP

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

1. (S) In a November 8 meeting, Minister without Portfolio Haim Ramon confirmed to Ambassador Jones that the GOI would accept the initiation of a technical feasibility study for what the GOI prefers to call a "transportation connection" between Gaza and the West Bank. Ramon presented proposed terms of reference that provided for the study of the "technical, financial and infrastructure aspects of such a link," but excluded consideration of anything of "a political nature, such as allocation of rights and responsibilities, and legal and other arrangements as well as security considerations." Ramon said that security, operations, and implementation of the plan would be subject to direct negotiations between the GOI and the PA. The terms include a study of a rail link, which he described as possibly using existing tracks with an additional spur connecting Erez and Tarkumiya. USAID will initiate the study immediately.

2. (S) According to Ramon, the use of convoys to establish the Gaza - West Bank link would come first, to be followed by a rail link as an interim solution. Finally, the terms allow for a study of a tunnel link, which Ramon described as the ultimate preferred Israeli option. The railway option is expected to be faster and cheaper than a tunnel, said Ramon, but political considerations make the tunnel the best long-term choice for the Israelis. The railway is technically and bureaucratically the fastest option because of existing tracks and the fact that it already has the approval of the Prime Minister, the Cabinet, and various ministries. Ramon stated that the construction of a railroad could start tomorrow and be completed quickly because the necessary rights of way are secured and provided it is routed through the proper terrain.

3. (S) Ramon also reported that negotiations on a seaport for Gaza would begin next week with PA Civil Affairs Minister Dahlan representing the Palestinians. The Peres staff has been in touch with the French and Dutch about funding the project and are aware that a letter of guarantee from the GOI to the EU guaranteeing both the construction of the port and its ability to function would be necessary for any government to risk building it. Ramon also confirmed the acceptance of a third party role at the port. His comments on the political situation in the wake of the Likud rebels blocking Sharon's ministerial appointments are reported septel.

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JONES